

What is the Mokele-Mbembe? Unknown Creature Seen in Africa

By WILLY LEY



NATIVE WITH CAPTURED "JAVA DRAGON."

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THE science of the extinct animals of former periods of the earth, now called paleontology or paleozoology, is little more than a hundred years old. It has been agreed since that it began in 1824, when the great French scientist, George Cuvier, published his now classic work on "Recherches sur les Ossements Fossiles."

This new science brought surprises to the public, animals of a shape and size unheard of; the outstanding event of the whole period being the reconstruction of the Megatherium, the Giant Sloth of South America. The interests of scientists and public focussed alike on the giants of former time; there was something like a general feeling that zoology had nothing more to do. Cuvier himself expressed this general attitude one day when he declared in a lecture that the dis-

covery of new and hitherto unknown living animals could no longer be expected.

Okapi Discovered

Though Cuvier was wrong in this thesis—he was wrong with a few other pet theories of his also—there actually elapsed the rest of his century without a new discovery. Exactly in the first year of the next century, in 1900, the first great discovery since Cuvier was made: the African Okapi, a short-necked giraffe.

It seemed as if this first discovery after a long pause introduced a series of others. In 1904 a large wild pig (Hylochoerus) of a hitherto unknown species was discovered by Lieutenant Meinerzhagen in East Africa. In 1910 the German explorer, Hans Schomburgk, rediscovered in Liberia the

the German explorer, Hans Schomburgk, rediscovered in Liberia the Choeropsis, sometimes called "dwarf-hippo." This most interesting animal had been known before, i.e., the skin and the skeleton had been shipped to Europe occasionally in the 18th and 19th centuries. But no scientist has ever seen it alive, and since there were no shipments for more than sixty years it was believed to be extinct.

Java Lizards

Two years after Schomburgk's successful voyage to Liberia it was announced from Java that lizards of unbelievable size had been found on the little island of Komodo, in the Sunda Archipelago. But it was more than twelve years later that the Douglas Burden expedition brought some scientific information about Varanus komodoensis, the largest living lizard. At

the same time the German scientist, Dr. P. Vageler, announced a new type of rhinoceros from Sumatra.

In 1929 a French geologist, M. de Loys, returned from Venezuela with the astounding news that his camp had been attacked by a couple of apes. In order to understand the full significance of this report one has to remember that South America is a country in which apes are not known outside the zoological parks. Unfortunately Monsieur de Loys—being on a geological expedition—did not have the necessary equipment to preserve the body of one ape he killed, but he took a photograph of the cadaver, which



Giant Varoes komodoensis of the

allows the conclusion that it belongs to a species unknown to zoology.

Zoologists and zoological institutions receive with a certain regularity reports from various parts of the earth concerning still unknown animals, seen on rare occasions. Not all these reports are of value, of course; it is too easy to mistake one animal for another at night or in a haze when one is not a trained observer.

"Mokele-Mbembe"

But the most important of all these still possible discoveries is the one of the animal called Mokele-Mbembe by the negroes of the African Congo district.

The first scientist—at least to my knowledge—who dared to publish his opinion about these rumours was the famous German explorer Hans Schomburgk. As mentioned previously he was in Liberia in order to find out whether the "dwarf hippo" *Choeropsis* still existed. His employer was Carl Hagenbeck in Stellingen, near Hamburg. Schomburgk succeeded in catching specimens of this "extinct animal," thereby giving proof of the truth of native reports concerning his jungle existence.

On his travels Schomburgk arrived at the shore of the Bangweolo Lake

at the shore of the Bangweolo Lake in Liberia, and, judging from environment, he expected to find hippopotami of the large species in the water. To his surprise there were none, and he questioned the natives about this fact.

"The natives (I am quoting from his book, 'Wild and Wilde Herzen Afrikas') reported that there is an animal living in the lake which, though smaller than a hippo, catches and eats them. It must be fully amphibian in its habits, it never comes to the shore, and its footprints were never found. Unfortunately, I believe this story to be a fairy tale, and did not investigate any further. Later I spoke to Carl Hagenbeck about it, and I am convinced now that it must be a saurian of some type. I am of this opinion because Hagenbeck received reports from other sources which fully agree with my own observations and with the reports of the natives I questioned.

Native Stories

In spite of Hagenbeck's as well as Schomburgk's authority not much attention was being paid to this report. But their conclusion that there is a large unknown animal (be it saurian or not) has found an unsuspected strong support by a few paragraphs in the (unpublished) official report of the German "Likuala-Congo-Expedition" of 1910.

the German "Likuala-Congo-Expedition" of 1913-14. Leader of the expedition and author of the report was Captain Freiherr von Stein zu Lausnitz. He repeats with utmost caution and precaution narratives of the natives of the former German colony, Kamerun, about a "creature which is feared very much by the negroes of certain parts of the territory of the Congo, the lower Uzanzi, the Ssanga and the Ikelemba." Von Stein puts emphasis on the fact that the narratives came from "well experienced guides who repeated the same characteristics of the story without knowing each other."

The native name of the animal is "Mokele-Mbembe"; Von Stein apparently did not succeed in finding out whether these words have a special meaning. As to the probable habitat of the animals he refers to a mentioning from the Benue River, and continues (I translate word for word from the unpublished reports . . .)

"The creature is reported not to live in the smaller rivers like the two Likualas, and in the mentioned rivers there are only very few individuals said to exist. At the time of our expedition a specimen was reported from the not navigable part of the Ssanga River, about between the two rivers Mbala and Pikunda.

Animal Described

"The narratives of the natives give about the following description: "The animal is said to be of a brownish-grey colour with a smooth skin; its size equalling that of an elephant; at least that of a hippopotamus. It is said to have a long very flexible neck and only one, but very long tooth; some say it is a horn. A few spoke about a long muscular tail like that of an alligator. Canoes coming near to it are said to be doomed, the animal is said to attack them at once and to kill the crew without eating the bodies up.

"The creature is said to live in the caves which have been washed by the river at the sharp bends in the clay of the shore. It is said to climb to shore even at daytime in search for its food, which is described as being purely vegetable. This feature disagrees with a possible explanation as a myth. The preferred growth was shown to me. It is a lane with large white blossoms, milky juice, and apple-like fruits. At the Ssombu River I was shown a path said to be made by this animal in order to get to its food. The path was fresh and there were lanes of the described type nearby. But since there were too many spoors of elephant, hippo, and buffalo it was impossible to make out a particular spoor with any amount of certainty."

The Moosh-roosh?

Granted that these reports are neither exaggerated nor misinterpreted it would still be preposterous to believe this animal to be a saurian or

it would still be preposterous to believe this animal to be a saurian or of a reptilian nature. But there is another, as yet unexplained, a story about an animal which suggests a reptilian nature. The main question is whether we are allowed to relate the Mokele-Mbembe to the "Moosh-roosh!"

Moosh-roosh is either the Babylonian word for "dragon" or the Babylonian name for one particular dragon, probably the one that is referred to in the Bible.

Some ancient reports relate that this dragon Moosh-roosh was pictured on the temple—but it is by no means certain whether the picture was on the temple where the animal itself was kept or in another temple. The temple as well as the picture were lost for a long time and only pictures on Assyrian vases gave an approximate idea of how the Babylonian dragon was said to have looked. But in the beginning of our century archaeologists began to unearth the temple of the Babylonian sun-god, Ishtar. The so-called "procession way" and the gate of this temple are now one of the main attractions of the Berlin Museum for Archaeology, which is usually referred to as the Pergamon Museum.

Temple Pictures

The Ishtar Gate shows in a regular spacing the pictures of three animals in grey and yellow on a blue background. In the procession way the lion (sacred to Ishtar) is the animal chosen for decorative design. These lions allow us to judge of the truthfulness of the animal pictures of the gate, since the original is well known to us. The lion picture is—though slightly ornamental in design—as near to nature as it can be, which allows the same conclusion as to the two pictures of the gate itself.

One of them is the wild ox (*Bos primigenius*), a now extinct animal. But we know later and more modern pictures of the wild ox, which look very similar to this one so that we can say that it is not only reasonably but—considering the time of its origin and the material—extraordinarily accurate.

The third picture of the Ishtar temple or the second on the gate is that of the Moosh-roosh. Officially it is a fabled animal, but it is hard to see why the Babylonians, after giving two perfectly true pictures of existing animals should suddenly go to myth for the third one. This logic in itself justifies the conclusion that they knew either directly or from hearsay, about the animal similar in appearance. Another important consideration is that truly fabled animals always combine features of various existing animals—for example, there are characteristics of eagles and lions, or even of human beings and lions or horses mixed together. In short, fabled animals look somehow impossible to the eyes of a biologist. But the Moosh-roosh looks possible; there are no weird mixtures of various anatomical characteristics.

of various anatomical characteristics.

Not a Myth

The picture of the Ishtar Gate shows exactly these features, bird-like hind legs, and animal-like forelegs, and so do the Assyrian picture from vases, albeit it has to be admitted that they add ornamental-looking wings. Neck and tail of the Moosh-roosh are long and apparently muscular, and the small reptilian head, with the forked tongue, shows a single long horn. As to the size of the creature, we have no means of comparison. Though wild ox and Moosh-roosh are pictured in about the same size, we have no reason to conclude that they actually were of the same size.

This is the sum total of our present day knowledge of the object: First, that there prevails in certain parts of Africa the story of a large animal living in a few specimens in certain rivers. Second, that the description of this animal brings zoologists to the conclusion that it is not a myth. Third, that the Assyrians and Babylonians talked about an animal Moosh-roosh which type pictured among natural and not mythical or fabled animals. Fourth, that the picture of the Moosh-roosh reminds the observer of an extinct order of reptiles which, though belonging to the saurians, was not of an extraordinary large size, and (at least in a few varieties), walked alternately erect or quadruped. Fifth and finally, that the picture of the Moosh-roosh and the description of the Mokele-Mbembe bear a strong resemblance to each other.